

## Masters of Resilience: The Impact of Internal Communication in International Technology Companies

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# IMPRINT

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Communicating with, through, and as the Recipient. Changing the Rules in Strategic Communication and Journalism

Edited by Alexander Godulla, Sabrina Doberts, Carolina Müller and Hannah Ötting

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# **MASTERS OF RESILIENCE**

## **The Impact of Internal Communication in International Technology Companies**

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**Hanna Ahrenberg, Michael Bausch, Julian Reitner, Laura Steglich,  
Eszter Számadó, Elias Weber**

### **Abstract**

Today's dynamic and unpredictable VUCA world raises the question of how organizations can react to sudden changes in the most resilient way. This paper examines the contribution of internal communication as a management function to building individual resilience and its impact on the organizational level. The literature review reveals a prevailing theoretical focus within the current state of research, further entailing a lack of empirical work on the contribution of internal communication to strengthening resilience. In order to fill this gap, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted with internal communication experts from international technology companies. The findings confirm the contribution of internal communication to value creation by building resilience potential as an intangible success factor in an increasingly volatile market. Additionally, hypotheses for further quantitative testing are provided. The associated new understanding of the role of employees calls for a reorientation of internal communication itself.

**Keywords:** resilience, internal communication, agility, VUCA world, value creation

## **1 Introduction**

Although the world has become increasingly prosperous and peaceful in recent years, it has also become more complex, fast-moving, and threatening. The immense speed of ecological and societal developments stresses and overwhelms people and organizations, it makes long-term planning impossible and demands decisions in a rush. A recent WHO-led study points out that more than 264 million people worldwide suffer from depression (GBD 2017 Disease and Injury Incidence and Prevalence Collaborators, 2018, p. 1817).

The strained mental health of employees forces companies to make themselves and their staff members more resilient. The concept of resilience is a promising starting point for coping with the high demands of a constantly changing environment (Luthans, 2002, p. 706) and thereby for protecting mental health. Resilience, on the organizational level, describes the capacity of a company to maintain its ability to act under crisis conditions (Seville et al., 2008, p. 18). In this context, internal communication (IC) makes a contribution to value creation by supporting a company's core processes and therefore strengthening the resilience of its employees (Kim, 2020). Due to the increased contribution of IC to value creation, Buchholz and Knorre (2012) suggest an approach that places IC closer to top management (p. 83). Another important factor is the changing role of employees: On the one hand, they are a valuable and scarce resource and, on the other hand, they can play a decisive role in shaping the corporate culture through digitized communication channels.

The link between resilient employees and organizational resilience has not yet been researched extensively. This paper, therefore, focuses on this connection, with IC as an intermediary. Due to the lack of previous research, the topic requires a qualitative-explorative approach, whose interest is the contribution of internal communication as a management function to (organizational and individual) resilience.

To this end, technology companies are to be examined, as they play a pioneering role concerning agile working and digitalization.

Within the given paper, firstly, a systematic and interdisciplinary literature review in communication science, economics, and psychology provides a comprehensive understanding of resilience and its dimensions. Secondly, the results of twelve semi-structured in-depth interviews with IC managers of international technology companies fill the prevailing theoretical focus of resilience research with insights from practice. Subsequently, the research questions are answered, hypotheses are derived and a framework is then developed from these results. Finally, an outlook for further research and a practical application is provided.

## **2 Literature Review**

The question of how organizations can successfully deal with complex, unpredictable, dynamic, and constantly changing environments — described today as a VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity) world (Mack, Khare, Krämer, & Burgartz, 2016, p. 3) — has been a prevailing topic both in industry and academia for decades. A concept that was looked at closer in this context, e. g. by Dühring and Zerfass (2021), is agility, meaning that organizations become significantly more flexible, faster, and responsive (Sherehiy, Karwowski, & Layer, 2007, pp. 456–457) by establishing new ways of planning, organizing, and stakeholder interaction (Dühring & Zerfass, 2021, p. 93). In the context of this paper the concept of resilience, i. e. the ability to or the process of reintegrating or “bouncing back” from disruptions in life (Buzzanell, 2010, p. 1; Richardson, 2002, p. 309) will be surveyed closer.

### **2.1 The Concept of Resilience in Business Research**

According to Sutcliffe and Vogus (2003), resilience can be examined on the individual (employee), group (team) or organizational level (p. 95; see also Ma, Xiao, & Yin,

2018). This paper focuses on the individual level, i. e. the condition arising from the interaction of internal (psychological) and external (contextual) factors that makes the successful handling of challenging situations possible (Luthans, Vogelgesang, & Lester, 2006, p. 28). Moreover, the capacity of an organization to maintain its ability to act and thereby survive in the face of a crisis (Seville et al., 2008, p. 18) will be studied on an organizational level.

Since today's volatile working environment causes special requirements for employees and can have a negative impact on their mental health (Kestel, 2019, para. 2), individual resilience is a suitable starting point to successfully cope with high loads of stress in the context of significant change and adversity (Luthans, 2002, p. 706) and thereby protect mental stability. The organizational ability to adapt quickly and successfully to constantly changing requirements and to manage uncertainty (Lee, Vargo, & Seville, 2013, pp. 29–30) presupposes that companies have to increasingly align their management activities with making an organization more resilient. In doing so, they aim to secure the future of the company and to be able to create value for their stakeholders (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 3).

Coutu (2002) and Kim (2020) point towards an interplay of resilience on the individual and organizational level, going so far as to suggest a mutual dependence of the two. The researchers propose that employee capabilities and their individual resilience contribute decisively to the resilience of an organization (p. 46; p. 47). For this reason, companies have to develop structures in which the individual resilience of managers and employees can flourish (Wellensiek, 2017, p. 12). By doing so, the resilience of an organization under VUCA conditions shall be maintained or increased.

Further, Buchholz and Knorre (2019) point out that one of the factors making it possible for organizations to survive and sometimes even gain strength from crises is their agility (p. XIII). In that sense, this paper takes the considerations of Dühring and Zerfass (2021) — who state that communication departments need to adapt

their own structures and processes in order to become more agile, as well as to enhance organizational agility by enabling other departments, and to communicate the agile transformation of their organization both internally and externally (p. 93) — as an important prerequisite for a company to become resilient. The topic of diversity<sup>1</sup> is also considered as a characteristic of resilient organizations here, as a diverse workforce with a heterogeneous (personal) background can contribute to an increasing agility of companies (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 7).

As mentioned above, academic works that show that the resilience of employees contributes decisively to the resilience of an organization already exist (e. g. Coutu, 2002; Kim, 2020). However, within said field of research, a literature review of 58 peer-reviewed English-language scientific journal articles from the EBSCOhost database collection in psychology, communication, and economic sciences from the last five years (start: January 01, 2016) regarding the resilience of organizations showed, that studies on the level of entire organizations or considering employees as individuals prevail.

One aspect that is examined at the overall organizational level is the influence of the organizational structure (Al-Atwi, Amankwah-Amoahm, & Khan, 2021; Klimek, Varga, Jovanovic, & Székely, 2019). Also, the importance of the corporate culture (Black & La Venture, 2018), and more precisely the learning or failure culture (Anderson-Fletcher, Vera, & Abbott, 2017), where empowerment plays an important role (Brandhorst, 2018), or also generally anchoring resilience in the culture are considered (Harrison et al., 2017). In addition, the role of leadership (Teo, Lee, & Lim, 2017) and required technologies, which also enable the requisite of agility through information exchange and collaboration (Kogenhop, 2020), are further topics addressed in this context.

<sup>1</sup> Definitions of diversity focus on various dimensions, such as gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, education, or work status (Podsiadlowski, Groeschke, Kogler, Springer, & van der Zee, 2012, p. 160). Kreitz (2008) subsumed all these points under the definition of diversity as “any significant difference that distinguishes one individual from another” (p. 102).

In terms of employee resilience, moreover, the concept of well-being (Prime, Wade, & Browne, 2020) comes into discussion, as does the influence of (private) relationships (Beckman & Stanko, 2020).

It is pointed out here that the boundary between work and home is becoming increasingly fluid making private aspects become decisive for the resilience of the individual. Furthermore, Pelser, Bosch, and Schurink (2016) take a closer look at how employees deal with emotionality (e.g. in times of crisis), concluding that “technostress”, i.e. the increased use of new technology, can have a negative impact upon individual resilience too (Carlotto, Wendt, & Jones, 2017).

However, the literature review shows that mostly human resource actions are considered in greater detail to link employee resilience and organizational resilience (Wilson, 2016). Khan et al. (2019) for example, address various human resource practices that support employee resilience, such as an inclusive and diverse workplace design. Positive influences of the inclusion of external coaches to build a learning culture within an organization is also pointed out (Wilson & Lawton-Smith, 2016).

Buzzanell (2010) argues that human resilience is constituted through communicative processes (p. 9). Moreover, with regard to companies, Zerfass and Viertmann (2017) show that corporate communication can also contribute to a company's value creation by fostering flexibility, adapting strategy, and ensuring operations, as well as building intangibles, which are crucial factors for the resilience of an organization (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014, p. 314). Hence, it becomes important to take IC into consideration as a part of corporate communication which primarily addresses internal company stakeholders. Through said approach the topic of individual and organizational resilience of corporations can be explored further.



## **2.2 The Concept of Resilience in Internal Communication Research**

According to Zerfass (2010) interdisciplinary and integrated approach, corporate communication pursues the overall goal of “formulating, realization and implementation of concrete corporate strategies” (pp. 289–290). IC, as a part of corporate communication, focuses primarily on the organizational field, whereby the target groups include, on the one hand, the “constitutional constituent groups” who can co-determine the objectives or policies of the company through certain rights or laws, and all other roles such as the employees (Zerfass, 2010, pp. 290–293).

In recent years IC, next to market communication, financial communication, and public relations, has become increasingly important for the success of companies — especially given the constantly changing environment with challenges such as digitalization and globalization they are operating in (Slijepčević, Bovan, & Radojević, 2018). Another reason for the increasing importance of IC is the changing position of the employees in the context of polyphonic corporate communication researched by Christensen and Cornelissen (2011) as well as Zerfass and Viertmann (2016). Within this framework organizations are dependent on the multiplicity of voices of their individual speakers, while simultaneously emerging from it (Christensen & Cornelissen, 2011, pp. 401–402). Organizations, therefore, need to find ways — possibly with the help of IC — of orchestrating these multiple voices of their employees in order to achieve their joint corporate goals (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016, p. 45). In the context of resilience, Buchholz and Knorre (2012) also point out that IC increasingly sees managers and employees in terms of promoting resilience as an internal resource instead of merely as a target group, by incorporating their knowledge and evaluations into the general management and thus making the company more vigilant for threats (pp. 8–9). All of these statements are indications that, with the changing requirements towards IC, the understanding of employees for IC itself must change. In this context, however, it should be emphasized that the aim within the given paper is not to master isolated change projects (Li, Sun, Tao,

& Lee, 2021) or internal crises (Kim, 2020), but to ensure a corporation's long-term success by developing resilience through IC.

When considering barriers to resilience, however, Ford (2018) points out the role of limited access to information, identity constructions that promote simplistic interpretations, a lack of reflection due to message fatigue, and generational differences (pp. 198–199). In the context of the literature review, some aspects from the field of IC that address the stated challenges could already be analyzed. For instance, it was found that at the level of individuals ( $n = 25$ ), information transfer ( $n = 5$ ), identification with (organizational) values ( $n = 3$ ), and feedback ( $n = 3$ ) or exchange opportunities ( $n = 3$ ) were particularly frequently mentioned as important factors for building resilience. This is made possible by creating information structures and space for dialogue and by communicating cultural values. In addition, the actions of storytelling, as well as systematic information management, were also pointed out.

At the organizational level ( $n = 19$ ), it was shown that intra-organizational communication can also initially help to make knowledge and information accessible and usable ( $n = 4$ ). Leadership communication can also help to positively influence employees' sense-making ( $n = 1$ ) and sending messages of hope ( $n = 2$ ) can strengthen organizational resilience. IC can, according to the findings of the literature review, finally embed resilience thinking within the whole of an organization ( $n = 1$ ), strengthen psychological beliefs ( $n = 1$ ), enhance employee capabilities ( $n = 1$ ), and promote the dissemination of positive messages about the organization by employees ( $n = 1$ ). Nevertheless, this is only an initial list which is not to be seen as extensive. A comprehensive, up-to-date empirical study on the topic of IC and resilience in companies does not yet exist.

Buchholz and Knorre (2012), however, have already taken a more general, initial theoretical look at the extent to which IC can make a value-adding contribution to a company's resilience. According to them, the goal of the various corporate functions is to ensure that the disruptions and changes caused by the VUCA world

have as few negative consequences as possible for the company or its business operations. IC should therefore ensure that an organization develops an awareness of vigilance, establishes and maintains appropriate routines for this, builds up resilience knowledge, and is always prepared to deal flexibly with disruptions (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 14–15). In order to identify possible ways in which IC can influence the resilience of companies, they drew on considerations by Zerfaß (2007): In addition to pursuing value-oriented goals, such as increasing the company's revenue or value, which are primarily directed at capital owners, it is equally important to focus on a company's other stakeholders to secure legitimacy.

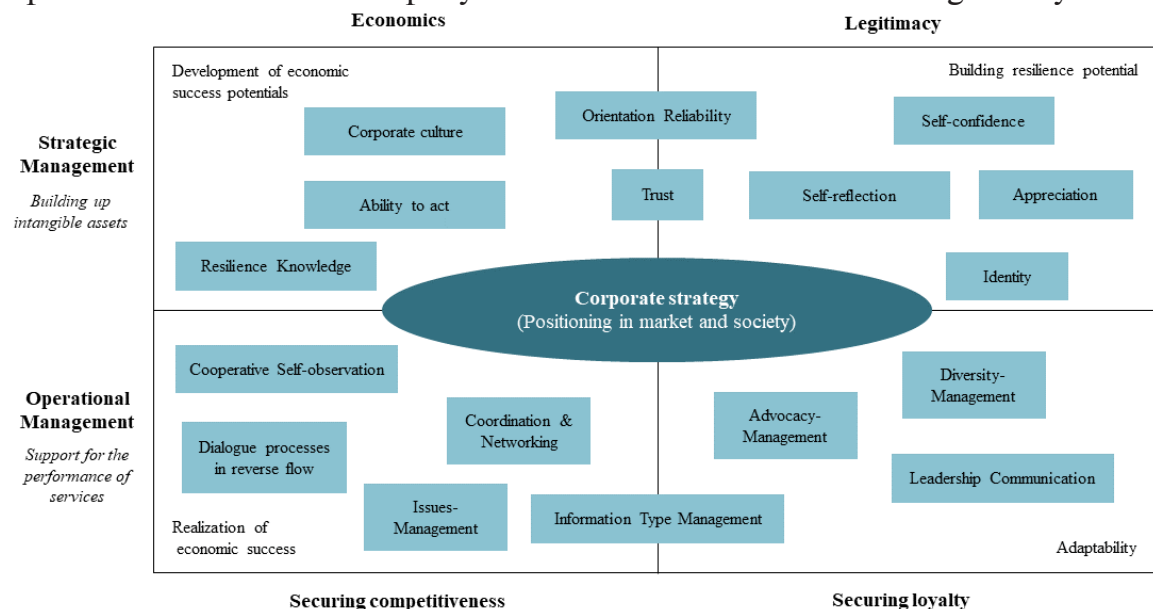


Fig. 1: The Supporting Potential of IC in the Value Creation Process of Resilient Organizations (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 19, own translation).

Based on the corporate strategy it is thus a question, on the one hand, of achieving economic success by securing competitive advantages, profitability, and liquidity and, on the other hand, of creating and maintaining the “license to operate” (Zerfaß, 2007, pp. 24–27). In the model shown below, by Buchholz and Knorre (2012), it becomes apparent that thus the economic view is also concerned with ensuring competitiveness on one side, and the legitimacy view with employee loyalty, on the other side. However, these two phenomena should not be seen separately from

each other; rather, loyalty leads to competitiveness and thus to the achievement of corporate goals within the scope of corporate strategy.

Even so, the existence of many factors effective for competitiveness is also necessary to achieve or maintain loyalty. In this context, the development of intangible values is particularly important (p. 20). Fig. 1 furthermore shows that Buchholz and Knorre could already identify initial potentials of IC that contribute to the creation of competitiveness and loyalty by building intangible capital or supporting the performance of services. Along this line, in a VUCA world, IC constantly has the task of enabling employees to continually adapt to organizational deformations without losing sight of the fundamental direction of the company (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 18–19). This study will build further on these initial theoretical considerations by analyzing the latest developments of this topic in the practice of international technology companies.

### **2.3 Research Questions**

Buchholz and Knorre (2012) already present a comprehensive theoretical basis of IC as a management function and its potential contribution to strengthening the resilience of employees and companies. However, the literature review also shows that IC has only sporadically played a role in the fields of resilience-related corporate communication and strategic communication research, which is why further inquiry is needed. Since the technology sector is seen as a leading industry in digitalization and agile ways of working, and is among the industries with the best predictions for digital sales development within the next few years (Grebe, Leyh, Franke, Förderer, & Heinzl, 2018; Workday, 2019), the focus of this study lies on international technology companies. Also, these companies have not been considered in detail in the context of resilience yet, although they suggest being able to provide a lot of information about resilient structures. This paper aims to fill this research gap by exploring the impact of IC as a management function on organizational resilience in international technology companies under VUCA conditions.

Specifically, this study explores the following research questions:

*RQ 1:* Which actions are taken in the context of internal communication in international technology companies in order to increase organizational resilience through individual resilience?

*RQ 2:* To what extent does internal communication influence agility as a prerequisite for organizational resilience in international technology companies?

*RQ 3:* To what extent does the role of employees change for internal communication in international technology companies in the context of organizational resilience?

### **3 Methodology**

As there were hardly any previous insights or data on the topic, a qualitative approach was pursued to determine which IC activities are taken in practice to promote resilience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the research questions. As a qualitative work, this paper does not claim to be representative but limits itself to the context of the technology sector. The sample consists of twelve experts in the field of IC from technology companies, operating in multiple markets, with headquarters in a German or English-speaking country, so as not to distort the research results due to language barriers or major cultural differences. The companies employ a total of approximately one million people worldwide and their sizes range from an annual revenue of under five billion (25%) and five to 20 billion (33%) to over 20 billion euro (42%). Further details on the sample can be seen in tab. 1.

Since IC is considered a management function in our study, the selected interviewees were involved in planning, directing, or controlling activities, having a managerial role rather than that of a communications technician (Broom & Smith, 1979). With

seven female and five male respondents, the sample is close to the actual gender distribution of approximately 60 percent female PR practitioners in Germany (Bentele, Fechner, & Seidenglanz, 2018, p. 16) and 59 percent women in managerial positions within the U.S. PR industry (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020).

<b>Interviewee Official Position Title</b>	<b>Gender male/female</b>	<b>Company No. of Employees in Thous. (2020)</b>	<b>Annual Revenue in hund. Mill. € (2020)</b>	<b>Location Country</b>	<b>Headquarters Country</b>
Senior Consultant Employee Engagement	f	293	55.3	GER	GER
Key Account HR (before: Internal Communications)	f	226	101	GER	GER
Director of Communications & Member of the Executive Board	m	168	117.5	GER	USA
Expert Executive & Internal Communications	m	93	45.0	GER	UK
Internal Communications Manager	f	78	40.4	USA	USA
Head of Operations Office and Executive Board & Assistant to COO	m	47	8.6	GER	GER
Head of Communications	m	32	6.3	GER	GER
Global Customer Operations & Internal Communications Manager	f	27	17.2	IRL	USA
Employee Communications Manager International	f	23	10.6	UK	USA
Head of Internal Communications	f	8	0.8	GER	GER
Head of Content in Digital Media	m	8	1.2	GER	GER
Junior Manager Internal Communications	f	2	0.3	GER	GER
<b>Total</b>		1,005	404		
<b>Arithmetic Mean</b>		84	37		
<b>Median</b>		40	17		

Tab. 1: Anonymized composition of the sample (n=12)

The interviews took place from the fifth of January to the twelfth of February 2021 via videoconference and had an average duration of 44 minutes, with the shortest lasting 25 and the longest 50 minutes. Three blocks of interview questions were based on the research questions, which were operationalized in particular by using the model from Buchholz and Knorre (2012). The first block of questions dealt with the creation of individual resilience among employees as well as the connection to organizational resilience and touched on several aspects (promotion of identification with the company, acceptance for change, self-confidence and initiative, employee appreciation, and self-reflection). In the second block, the use of digital tools for

IC in general and the extent to which these contribute to agility was discussed. Reasons for use and the impact on communication were considered, including the implications for cross-hierarchical and cross-departmental exchange and receiver-specific information management. The last block of questions was deliberately designed due to the low level of previous insights, as it addressed upcoming changes in the role of employees, IC, and diversity.

The transcribed audio recordings were transferred into the MAXQDA-software program to apply the method of a qualitative content analysis. Following Fereday and Muir-Cochrane's (2006) hybrid approach, the category system was constructed from both deductive and inductive categories in an "iterative and reflexive process" (p. 83) of obtaining categories from literature and testing them on the material. In this way, both the insights gained from the literature review and the themes derived from the data were considered in the step-by-step construction and adaptation of the codebook. Inter- and intracoder reliability were ensured by group discussion of critical text passages and multiple coding by different coders (Van den Hoonaard, 2008, p. 446). Finally, by paraphrasing and condensing the content and developing core statements, it was possible to structure and elaborate key findings from which a framework was derived.

#### **4 Findings**

In the interviews, some IC experts could not clearly differentiate between their contribution to organizational resilience and the resilience of their communication department. Thus, some findings could be attributed to more than one research question. Nevertheless, interviewee responses were collated as precisely as possible and are reported here in the order consistent with the research questions so that three hypotheses can be derived. The results confirm the potentials of IC for promoting resilience identified in the theory in many respects. Nevertheless, the literature analysis can be supplemented by further inductive aspects:



The experts underline how important IC is for promoting resilience potentials for intangible performance creation and thus for corporate success.

#### **4.1 Creating Resilience Potentials**

*RQ1:* Which actions are taken in the context of internal communication in international technology companies in order to increase organizational resilience through individual resilience?

Important aspects for creating agility by IC are facets of orientation, amongst others reliability, motivation, identification, transparency, exchange, sense of purpose, understanding of change and integration. Communicating decisions, events, and developments regularly, comprehensively, and transparently is therefore a main task of IC to provide orientation by offering trustworthy information to employees in a centrally controlled way. Motivation, purpose and identification with the company can be fostered by telling stories from the employees' point of view and success stories of the company itself as well as by communicating the added value of corporate activities for society and for customers. Basically, IC serves as an intermediary between employees and various management levels. Whether in relation to middle management or the top board level: Vertical and horizontal exchanges with all employees — on general organizational, job-specific, and higher-level corporate topics — should take place in an understandable, authentic and regularly way. For this reason, the corporate strategy must be prepared for follow-up communication so that employees can fully understand it and align their activities accordingly. As one expert states: "I am motivated when I know what the company is aiming for and what my contribution to achieving that goal is"<sup>2</sup> which shows how important linking individual working objectives to the overall (strategic) journey of the employer is.

One further task of IC is to establish and provide (digital) platforms and exchange formats where employees can address questions and feedback directly to the

<sup>2</sup> The interviews were conducted in German and English. All quotations from German interviews were translated into English by the authors.



management. In a VUCA environment, the communication of changes, (crisis) events or corporate developments such as strategy changes takes on an increasingly important role in generating trust and acceptance among employees. The findings show that an understanding for change is fundamentally created by transparent communication of the status quo, current events and goals of the company. Involving employees directly helps to create this kind of an understanding and increases long-term motivation. In this context, it is especially important to communicate changes first to those employees who will actually be affected by them.

Since organizational resilience is influenced by individual resilience, the mental health of employees is an important factor as well: IC is taking actions to promote well-being, e. g. by establishing art and culture programs in times of the Covid-19 pandemic. The aim of these offerings is to maintain the well-being of employees during an extraordinary time.

Moreover, cultural aspects were discussed which are considered in all communication activities and messages: In order to maintain the omnipresence of corporate culture and strengthen its visibility, it must be aligned to all communication actions. By incorporating elements of corporate culture such as values, goals, and mission statements into communication messages, employees' individual resilience can be strengthened.

## **4.2 Agility and Digital Ways of Working**

*RQ 2:* To what extent does internal communication influence agility as a prerequisite for organizational resilience in international technology companies?

One basis for agility is target group-specific information management which is realized both through communication according to functional and individual differentiation as well as through self-selection of employees. It turns out that

functional differentiation is practiced more frequently to date because it is easier to implement. Furthermore, individual differentiation and self-selection by employees are slowly increasing due to new data based possibilities which offer great potential for providing employees with information that are even more tailored to their needs. This target-group-specific information management can avoid information overload and thus relieve employees. Considering information management improved by the application of controlling methods and datafication, there is a strong focus on the use of digital tools for operational activities in terms of cooperation and collaboration: Eleven out of twelve of the companies surveyed address a multitude of digital (communication) channels and systems which are used. IC is aware of the new working circumstances and opportunities offered by digital means and assumes a dual role concerning their use: On the one hand, IC uses digital tools to perform its own tasks efficiently; on the other hand, it itself acts in the role of a facilitator and enabler to make the use of these new technologies accessible to employees. This trains employees in their independence and promotes collaborative and communicative exchange.

Besides several tools for daily collaboration, live streams and video conferences are used frequently in particular for digital meetings with many employees, such as town hall meetings, board updates, or events where great emphasis is put on dialog with participants. In addition, the intranet as the main communication platform for the entire organization is of high importance, as it can be used to provide both central corporate news and individualized content. Moreover, the use of an employee app is mentioned by two companies.

In order to improve the agility of the company, employees must be encouraged to take responsibility regardless of their position within the company and to act following their own initiatives rather than waiting to receive instructions. To achieve this, the activation of leaders is particularly emphasized as they play a central role in the enablement of their employees. An interviewee describes this as follows: “Developing

the desire and ability for self-management is the task of a manager today [...] and leads to a new role, to a new understanding of how work actually happens.” One aspect to start with is to actively involve employees in the improvement of processes and activities in relation to their area of work. Experts emphasized that a culture of learning and failure must be integral to ensure continuous improvement. It is helpful to allow constant feedback, so corporate actions and potential weaknesses of the respective business models can be examined. Also, employees can propose ideas on their own and are encouraged to exchange ideas with the IC. In terms of self-reflection, actions and potential weaknesses are critically examined, both concerning the corporate level and the individual level.

Recognition, appreciation, and reward are additional factors fostering employee’s enablement: Appreciation can either be shown in a material manner, e. g. through employee participation in the profit generated, gifts or an employee share purchase program, or through immaterial gestures, such as praise, the recognition of performance through awards, trust, or transparent communication. The experts interviewed emphasized especially the importance of non-material appreciation which can be conveyed via personal recognition by managers during everyday working routines. One company also introduced a motivational app that provides employees with a fictional currency, which can then be used to thank specific colleagues for project support.

### **4.3 Changing Roles**

*RQ 3:* To what extent does the role of employees change for internal communication in international technology companies in the context of organizational resilience?

With increasing individual initiative and enablement, employees must be encouraged and empowered to take on a communicative role as a content creator, content influencer, or advocate to communicate topic-specifically and independently for

their area or department in coordination with the IC. One expert described these new tasks and their challenges as follows:

So whether it is in employee networks [...] or whether it's leaders or any other team member. I encourage them to use the platforms to tell their own story and to create their own audience. Their expectation is that I will send everything out for them and they want to send email, but again it's an internal comms job to coach people [...] there is a hierarchy of messages, of importance. And we need to make sure that the people understand that channel strategy and how they can fit within it.

With guidance from IC and based on the (digital) platforms it provides across departments and hierarchies, employees are encouraged to generate content by themselves (employee-generated content), e. g. by organizing groups and exchanging information with each other on specific topics. Employees in the role of internal opinion leaders or informal representatives can be perceived as content influencers, i. e. opinion leaders from different peer groups or departments are being involved in the process of developing and distributing messages. This in turn helps IC in gathering impressions on a specific topic in order to communicate to the employees the most suitable and sensitive way. IC strives to build up a network of employees who serve as influencers for the company and pass on the content of corporate communication intended to involve all employees in an organization. In this context, one company takes up the term "employee advocacy" which focuses on empowering employees to advocate activities of their employer externally. Considering the cooperation of these employees with communication professionals on communication-related issues, the following statement reflects the room for improvement which can evolve for daily working routines of IC: "The local representatives of each of those employee resource groups would be engaged and we say 'What are your thoughts on this? How can we broaden our thinking on this? How would it work better?'"

As a consequence, the need for resilience management and the change in the role of the employee in terms of communication goes hand in hand with the changing requirements and new tasks for IC professionals: The focus increasingly lies on the provision of exchange platforms and templates for enabling employees and managers to become communicators. The most fundamental change identified is

the shift from sending to enabling in daily business: The main task of IC is not just to create content, but to orchestrate it and to enable all employees to create and distribute their own messages and topics. This includes, among other things, the task of managing internal channels, recruiting employees as influencers, providing platforms for communication, and topic management.

Moreover, it is important to find out what is currently on the minds of the workforce, so that these aspects can then be considered within IC:

But the job of an internal comms person [...] is to get out and build relationships and to listen. [...] Because you won't be effective in your job if you don't understand what's troubling people, what's exciting people. How could you possibly design anything that's gonna be meaningful for them if you never even met?

## **5 Discussion**

The main purpose of this study is to depict the role of IC as a management function within the linkage between individual and organizational resilience. Furthermore, the interdisciplinary research on resilience should be linked to the field of strategic communication and its discipline IC. Through the systematic literature review, this study first provided academic value by outlining an overview of measures and findings for promoting resilience at the organizational and individual level from the disciplines of psychology, communication, and economics. By synthesizing and contrasting the empirical results with the findings from the literature review, key aspects were compromised in a generic framework of internal corporate resilience management (Fig. 2) that visualizes the cornerstones of building resilience within organizations.

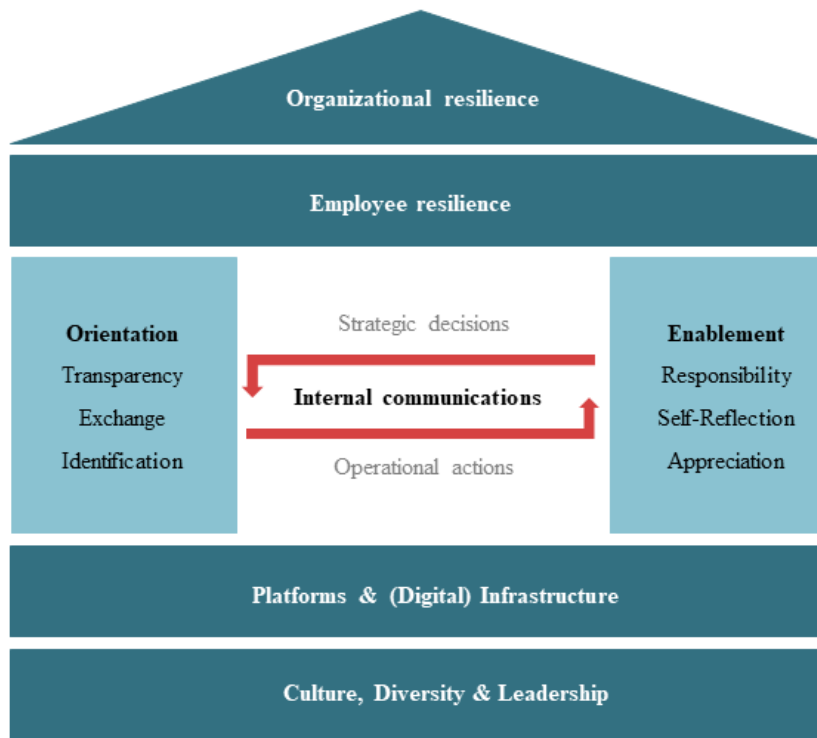


Fig. 2: The contribution of IC to internal corporate resilience management (own illustration)

Overall, IC acts as a bridge between the individual and organizational levels: The understanding of IC shown here demonstrates its managerial and communicative potentials in setting the direction and creating value for the organizations by making employees and, in the long-term, the organization more resilient. Therefore, the framework refers to specific supporting potential of IC (see Fig. 1) and structures them according to a normative approach of internal corporate resilience management. Although the framework is divided into separate dimensions, overlaps and interfaces between levels or columns can be identified. This shows that many aspects have to be considered simultaneously when talking about resilience. From this framework, implications for strategic decisions as well as operational actions can be derived, both for management and communication itself.

*Platforms and (Digital) Infrastructure* for sharing information and exchanging feedback, as well as *Culture, Diversity and Leadership*, can be named as prerequisites and

fundamental influencing factors that determine whether resilience potential can be built up. IC has only limited decision-making power in these areas, but it can address these ways of agile working and can give recommendations at a corporate level (Dühring & Zerfaß, 2021, p. 106) in order to create resilience-promoting conditions. The importance of integrating plurality as part of diversity management and its contribution to creating agility, as already pointed out in the previous literature (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 151–152), is highlighted by all experts: IC is meant to cover, promote and convey diversity in all communication activities, to establish gender-appropriate language, and to plan or organize activities and events to draw attention to different manifestations of diversity. Nevertheless, facets of diversity, mostly in the context of gender, are described rather exemplarily in relation to single communication activities. Only a small number of experts mention comprehensive diversity management as a part of their corporate culture. Because of this reason and the general importance of diversity, the aspect is listed separately in the framework.

Furthermore, empirical findings show that providing access to knowledge and information and anchoring resilience knowledge in corporate culture are key topics of resilience-fostering IC (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 15). Based on these preconditions for resilience, the following hypothesis was formulated:

*H1:* Corporate culture includes resilience knowledge and agile working with digital tools – competencies that are promoted by internal communication.

Orientation reliability and certainty help employees to see their contribution to the fulfillment of the corporate strategy and of their own tasks — this represents the most important value-added function of IC management, in order to sustain the competitiveness and profitability of an organization (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, p. 19). Orientation also includes the preparation of the corporate strategy for follow-up communication via information management and exchange formats, so that employees can familiarize themselves with the strategy and orient themselves along the lines of it. Additionally, transparency and identification were identified

as important facets of orientation. When talking about creating resilience potential by providing orientation, internal storytelling was mentioned as an important and success-promising communication format. Hence, it should be noted again and is included in the second hypothesis:

*H2: Internal storytelling formats increase organizational resilience by conveying facets of orientation.*

Employee stories can both increase a sense of purpose and identification and encourage self-reflection. Individual resilience is particularly strengthened when corporate values form the framework for communication activities.

IC departments carry a special responsibility for fostering organizational resilience by enabling other members of the corporation in various contexts: Employee enablement describes the approach of empowering employees to work independently, flexibly, and in an agile way. This can be achieved by offering employees the chance to take responsibility, giving opportunities for individual and collective self-reflection and maintaining appreciation. Additionally, self-reliance and information exchange are drivers of resilience and can be strengthened through the right use of platforms and digital infrastructure. IC must be aware of this and not only use collaboration and communication tools for its own purpose but also to enable employees to use them independently. This promotes agility, which in turn is essential for the resilience of the company. Regarding the topic of communications, IC can make a significant contribution to organizational resilience, if it succeeds in giving employees the power to speak on behalf of themselves and in guiding them to act as content creators or content influencers as proposed in the model of polyphony in corporate communication (Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016, p. 45). The concept of content influencers mentioned in the interviews matches in many ways the understanding of corporate ambassadors given in the literature by Brockhaus, Diecke, Hauck and Volk (2020): Here, employees function as in-house communicators. In contrast to social media influencers as external actors, in-house communicators perform



their role on a voluntary and unpaid basis, regardless of their specialist background and job description, and engage in communication activities for, within, about or on behalf of the organization (Brockhaus et al., 2020, pp. 117–118). This study only determined polyphony in relation to IC, specifically on the internal creation and (re-)distribution of content and messages without any regard to their external promotion focusing on corporate brand and reputation. This is why comprehensive concepts like employee advocacy — focusing on the enablement of the external promotion of brands and values of the employer company through supportive actions of employees (Buchholz & Knorre, 2012, pp. 159-160; Thomas, 2020, p. 169) — are not further thematized here. Keeping in mind this changing role of employees (Buchholz & Korre, 2012, pp. 8–9; Zerfass & Viertmann, 2016, p. 45) regarding their tasks as (internal) communicators, the third hypothesis based on the qualitative findings of enablement takes up new communication responsibilities as well:

*H3: Internal communication that enables employees and managers to act as communicators increases agility and thus organizational resilience.*

It is clear that this new understanding of the role of employees also means a fundamental change in the practice of IC — from sending to enabling.

As a key finding, it can be stated that IC has the potential of creating value in the long term through building resilience potential. This means that the changing role of IC professionals is becoming even more important for the survival of companies in the VUCA world — by creating *individual resilience* and thereby fostering *organizational resilience*.

## **6 Conclusion**

This paper shows that IC can play a significant role in promoting individual and organizational resilience. Statements by Buchholz and Knorre (2012), whose work largely forms the theoretical basis of the given research, could thus be proven and

substantiated in practice. In addition, the paper provides insights into the concrete implementation of resilience-promoting potentials in IC practice in the international technology industry. Due to the pioneering role of the companies interviewed, it was also possible to gain initial impressions of best practices. These include, in particular, internal storytelling formats, the enablement of employees to communicate independently, the use of digital communication tools and, above all, the concrete anchoring of resilience knowledge in a corporate culture. The resilience-promoting potential of IC should therefore also be given greater consideration in the training of internal communicators in the future.

As already mentioned, many factors are involved when resilience is addressed, meaning that the levels and dimensions of the framework of internal corporate resilience management are strongly combined in practice and cannot be clearly structured or differentiated. The given framework aims to sketch the most relevant aspects of resilience which were observed in the literature review and also in the interviews conducted with IC experts. This does not mean that resilience itself can be developed in a systematic process following the framework, because of factors correlating and overlapping in practice.

Taking the omnipresence of mental stress in the modern working world into account, further investigation of the phenomenon is not only desirable but absolutely necessary. A quantitative analysis of the effect of communication actions on individual employee resilience would now be a logical next step in order to verify the degree of effectiveness of the activities collected in this study. For this purpose, the hypotheses generated in this paper offer a promising basis. In addition, further surveys at later points in time would be interesting and necessary: On the one hand, this would allow long-term effects and developments in dealing with resilience to be identified; on the other hand, it would also allow the currently latent reference to the Covid-19 pandemic to fade into the background. Many of the changes in corporate communication mentioned in this paper were triggered by the pandemic.

In particular, remote working and the accelerated digitalization determined the IC practice of 2020. This is why the results must be viewed against the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic and its multi-layered impact on all areas of life, meaning that the findings cannot be generalized without reservations and caution. The increasing digitization of the working environment would presumably have taken place even without the pandemic, but probably at a slower pace. Nevertheless, it is possible to identify trends that can be used to make predictions about the future of work. In the end, the study of resilience-promoting actions could be extended to other sectors. After all, the challenges that make resilience necessary do not relate exclusively to the technology industry, but all economic branches. This would allow comparisons to be made as well as best practices to be reviewed and identified in other contexts.

The extent to which the VUCA world will influence working life in the upcoming years is difficult to predict. However, organizations and people alike will have to deal with crises and setbacks in the future with absolute certainty. To become or stay successful then, they should have resilience capacities, which might then in turn counteract recent increases in mental illnesses. Companies have a variety of means for this at their disposal, one of them being IC. As the current research has shown, IC has the potential to play a decisive role in shaping individual and organizational resilience and thereby to create value in the long-term.

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